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Huntsman: I'll use stimulus cash to bring Hollywood to Utah

Federal money » He also plans to invest in USTAR and help Utahns buy homes.

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Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. plans to use \$15 million of the federal stimulus money to sweeten the state's incentive to lure moviemakers to the state, he said Thursday.

"This, to my mind, will really put us on the map," Huntsman said. Companies frustrated with the cost of filming in Hollywood "want to break out."

"As soon as we get this done, I think we're going to have a lot of people [in Hollywood] express an interest in looking east," he said.

The film incentive is one element of \$87 million that is at the governor's discretion under the broad latitude granted under the federal stimulus package.

In addition to trying to entice filmmakers to the state, he is also aiming to attract cutting-edge researchers through a \$25 million investment through the state's colleges and universities. And he wants to use \$10 million to help qualified buyers purchase homes and get home construction moving again.

The governor has worked closely with legislative leaders, discussing how to best use the stimulus money, and lawmakers are on board with his plan, said Senate Majority Leader Sheldon Killpack, R-Syracuse.

Huntsman touted the film incentive in his State of the State address, complete with an appearance by Lucas Gabreel, a cast member of the "High School Musical" trilogy, which was filmed in Utah.

The incentive plan he is backing, which passed the Senate on Thursday, would give production companies filming in Utah a 20 percent tax credit -- up from the current 15 percent break -- for the amount spent in the state.

The productions would have to apply and be approved beforehand -- mostly, said Senate sponsor Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan, to guard against "hard-core porn" producers trying to take advantage of the perk. And the Utah Tax Commission would audit the spending to ensure that the claims are valid.

The tax break would cost the state about \$7.7 million per year. That means the stimulus money could fund the program for two years before it runs out.

Hillyard said that after two years, legislators could look at the results and see if it should be extended. "We think it will make its mark," he said.

Hillyard said there has already been one company that is interested in opening a production studio in the state.

Huntsman hopes to use the \$10 million to create a grant program for home buyers to start to purchase some of the 4,000 newly built homes that are sitting vacant.

"That, according to a lot of economists, ... would get people off the sidelines and into the marketplace, and there's a stimulus effect to our local economy that is quite important," Huntsman said.

Finally, Huntsman says he wants to invest \$25 million in the Utah Science Technology and Research Initiative "for specific USTAR programs that really focus on the industries of tomorrow."

Specifically, the governor points to promising programs like carbon capture technology for coal power plants and personalized medicine, which tailors a patient's treatment to his or her genetic characteristics.

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